

# CLOSING TIME FOR FREE SPEECH

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As national security trumps individual freedom,

# Sweden will curtail freedom of speech piecemeal, like death from a thousand cuts.

**Category:** [COMMENTARY](#)

**Tags:** [free speech](#), [Koran burning](#), [Rasmus Paludan](#), [Sven R. Larson](#), [Sweden](#)

Freedom of speech is under attack in Sweden. The public discourse, including statements by the prime minister and members of his cabinet, has now reached a point where there is reason to fear that new speech-restriction laws may be coming.

There are no proposals yet, but there is enough consensus in the media, in government voices, and among the general public, that calls for new legal measures are likely to emerge in the coming months. The main motivating factor would be to protect Swedish national security, specifically the process to make Sweden a NATO member, which is said to have been put in jeopardy because Rasmus Paludan, a Danish-Swedish political activist, [recently burned a copy of the Koran](#) outside the Turkish embassy in Stockholm.

Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, his foreign minister, and his defense minister have all in recent statements gone to great lengths to condemn the Koran burning. Those condemnations are meant to ease the tensions between Stockholm and Ankara but have not yet worked as intended. Therefore, with the prospects of NATO membership slipping away, the Swedish government is getting desperate. The rhetoric from political power players favoring new speech restrictions has reached such feverish levels that free-speech champion, writer, and journalist Mr. Nils Funcke [recently expressed](#) his fears of more speech infringements:

*The weakest link in terms of freedom of speech is the transmission from the person who produces a thought to the recipient. In dictatorships, it is a given to attack right here. However, even in more or less mature democracies, ministers of the government can nibble away at the ban on government interference with*

*freedom of speech.*

Funcke, who has dedicated much of his career to the defense of free speech, offered an incident from 2006 as a reference. A high-ranking official at the Swedish foreign ministry contacted an internet service provider [in an effort to shut down](#) a web-based magazine whose editorial decisions rubbed the foreign ministry the wrong way. Having [enlisted the assistance of the national security police](#), SÄPO, to lean on the publisher of the magazine, the foreign ministry successfully convinced the magazine to make editorial changes to the government's liking.

The magazine in question, the SD-Kuriren, was not just any publication. It was owned by the youth league of the Swedish Democrats, a conservative and nationalist party that at the time did not have seats in the parliament. However, their well-known criticism of Islam and immigration was likely the reason why they drew the ire of the Swedish government. In early 2006 they [republished a series of cartoons](#) of the Muslim prophet Muhammed that had originally appeared in [the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten](#).

The cartoons stirred up hostile reactions among Muslims globally. This in turn led the Swedish government to fear a negative impact on diplomatic relations with Islamic countries, as well as terrorist attacks on Swedish diplomatic outposts.

Since the cartoon controversy had begun in Denmark, the incident evolved into a telling comparison of the free speech commitments of the governments of the two neighboring countries. While the Swedish government was busy calling upon its national security police to strongarm an online magazine into speech submission, the Danish government came out strongly in defense of the freedom of speech.

They have not relented. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Denmark's prime minister at the time of the cartoon controversy, has on many occasions explained his government's vigorous defense of this fundamental freedom. This [video is a good example](#).

The difference between Sweden and Denmark has only grown wider with time. While the Danes have continued to defend the freedom of their citizens to express their opinions, no matter how controversial, Sweden has gradually moved in the opposite direction. This was most recently revealed when Rasmus Paludan went on [his latest Koran-burning tour](#) in both Stockholm and Copenhagen, and [promised more of the same](#). The Danish government continuously refuses to acknowledge any need to restrict freedom of speech. Danish media [line up on the same side](#).

In contrast, the Swedish prime minister was very quickly out after Paludan's latest stunt, [profusely apologizing](#) for how the agitator used his freedom of expression:

<https://twitter.com/SwedishPM/status/1616927938368229376>

It is worth noting that Rasmus Paludan himself is not a very nice person. In a well-researched article from August 2021, the [Danish daily newspaper EkstraBladet](#) reported that Paludan has a preference for talking intimately with underage boys in online forums. His choice of method for expressing criticism of Islam, i.e., burning the Koran in public, does not exactly help him earn any moral sympathy points.

For this reason, it is easy to dismiss Paludan and leave him to fend for himself. However, precisely because he is morally repulsive as a person, it is important to defend his freedom to express his opinions regarding Islam—especially since calls for restricting this freedom are getting louder.

On February 7th, during an appearance on Swedish public broadcasting television, former foreign minister and prime minister Carl Bildt, representing the right-of-center moderate party, [brought up so-called hate crimes](#) in the context of free speech:

*I am sure we are going to have a discussion about, what is a hate crime really? What is 'incitement against targeted demographics'? Because it is not the case ... when we talk about freedom of speech, it is not absolute, we have limits on the*

*freedom of speech in Sweden. Where do we draw that line? And that is a legitimate conversation.*

The term 'incitement against targeted demographics' is a subsection of the Swedish hate-crime law. It expands the crime to include certain general statements about racial, ethnic, religious, or gender identity groups.

After Bildt referenced hate crimes as an appropriate restriction on the freedom of expression, he called for a prosecutor to file charges against Rasmus Paludan. The purpose, he explained, would be to try whether or not the burning of the Koran is a hate crime under Swedish law.

Bildt also elevated Paludan's actions to where they now define the relationship between Sweden and Turkey. The tie between Paludan's use of his freedom of expression and the government's ambitions to bring Sweden into NATO has become a frequent talking point in the Swedish public discourse.

More politicians piled on. Former foreign minister and social democrat Jan Eliasson concurred with Bildt: the police in Stockholm should have stopped Paludan's Koran burning, and done so in the name of protecting Swedish national security interests. Incumbent foreign minister Tobias Billström has also expressed criticism of how the Koran burning intruded on the relations between Sweden and Turkey. His cabinet colleague, defense minister Pål Jonson, was more pointed, stating explicitly that Paludan's actions do not improve Sweden's chances of joining NATO.

In an interview with public broadcaster SVT, prime minister Ulf Kristersson went as far as he could condemning Paludan's actions without explicitly stating that Swedish freedom of expression should be restricted. However, at no point since the current Koran-related controversy started, has Kristersson addressed, let alone dismissed, the growing calls for such restrictions.

He had better step up to the plate. There is an ugly undercurrent in Swedish social media that is sympathetic to infringements on this fundamental component of a free society. This is not new: the willingness among Swedes to restrict freedom of speech was [revealed already six years ago](#), when a major opinion poll revealed that more than half of all Swedes support limitations to the freedom of expression "to prevent the offending of individuals, to counter racism, or to protect national security."

Here, again, the idea surfaces of so-called hate speech as a restriction on expression. Such laws already exist in Sweden, as they do in many other European countries, e.g., [France](#) and [Finland](#). This only raises the stakes, though: just like it is easier to raise an already existing tax than to introduce a new one, it is easier to expand speech bans once a version of them is already in place.

The likely path forward in Sweden is an expansion of the existing hate-speech subsection referring to 'targeted demographics.' It is unlikely that there will be an initiative in the *Riksdag*, the parliament, as things stand today, but if there is more violence from Muslims who feel targeted by, e.g., Paludan's actions, there will come a point where the balance of opinion among Swedes in general will swing decisively in favor of further speech infringements.

Public opinion in Sweden is of a beehive type, with strong self-imposed conformity mechanisms. Swedes are not used to individualism—dissent on both the personal and the collective level is strongly frowned upon. There is a saying in Denmark that 'the Renaissance made a halt in Copenhagen,' suggesting that Swedes never learned the art of individualism. There is more than a grain of truth to this: Swedes are careful to agree with what is considered the prevailing opinion. This is a strong cultural character trait that applies to political issues big and small.

It is also present in social settings; one of the greatest breaches of social protocol in Sweden is to express a dissenting view on any topic being discussed in any social setting. While this does not apply to formal politics—lest the lack of actual democracy be brought to full daylight—it does apply to issues considered to be of greater interest than normal

politics.

The issue of freedom of speech belongs in this 'greater interest' category. It is no coincidence that the prime minister and his cabinet have tied the question of free speech to national security. Nothing can boost an issue higher above formal partisanship than the 'national interest.' Once this happens, the average Swede will quickly line up behind the idea.

They will also accept whatever speech restrictions are being proposed without debate. Social pressure, exercised through the country's centuries-old conformity culture, will bring public opinion in line with what leading politicians will present as a regrettable necessity.

Another character trait in Swedish politics and Swedish society is to shun radical changes in favor of frog-boiling gradualism. Where some governments [take absurd measures](#) to curtail freedom of speech, the Swedish approach will be to slowly drain freedom of speech of its life by a thousand cuts. Increasingly vocal political Islamism will gradually gain more influence over legislation in Sweden, in particular within the realm of free speech.

The Islamist party Nyans, which started off strongly in the 2022 election campaign but fizzled out at the end, has found new lifeblood through Rasmus Paludan's Koran burnings. Party chairman Mikail Yüksel denounces Paludan's actions, summarily claiming that they [do not fall under free speech](#). His party is now planning a rally in Stockholm where [they will hang the effigies](#) of two prominent Swedish politicians.

If their rally is of any consequence, it will be to speed up the path to more speech restrictions. Fortunately, there appears to be at least some resistance to such ideas. Rasmus Paludan has received [surprisingly strong support](#) from Ms. Märta Stenevi, spokesperson for the far-left Green Party:

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*Even when it provokes strong reactions, it is extremely important that we who live in democracies, stand up for democratic values ... we don't have to love the forms of expression, but we need to stand up for democracy. ... If we start limiting freedom of speech, it will very quickly be curtailed step by step by step.*

It remains to be seen how steadfast Stenevi and other free-speech champions will be. If they fail, Sweden will pay a high price that the country will likely never recover from. Once the country has started down the slippery slope of speech restrictions, the speed of infringements will only accelerate until the freedom of speech is completely lost.

In the end, speech restrictions will deprive us of both truth and democracy. It is not worth it. Free speech must be protected everywhere, at all times.